

Manroland: The defense of jobs and the role of the German trade unions

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The protests carried out by Manroland workers last Thursday in Offenbach/Frankfurt, Augsburg and Plauen revealed a stark contradiction.

The vast majority of workers at all three factories are calling for a principled defence of their jobs, wages and living standards. Employees and apprentices were outraged by the manner in which management suddenly announced the company's bankruptcy. They are seeking to mount a united campaign to defend their jobs based on the concerted action of all employees at all of the company's plants.

The officials of the workers' trade union, IG Metall, have the opposite standpoint. They were informed of management's bankruptcy plans some time ago and kept them secret up to the last moment. Union officials had conducted talks on the future of Manroland with leading representatives of the state's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-Free Democratic Party (FDP) administration. This was confirmed by IG Metall district leader Armin Schild in an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

The union receives its information first-hand from its delegates who sit on the company's supervisory and economic committees. At the board meeting held on November 15, the union delegates agreed with management not to reveal the content of their joint discussions and to keep the workforce in the dark in order to avoid protests at the factories. They are opposed to any serious struggle because their main aim is to find a new investor for the company. To this end, they are willing to outsource work from the company and accept cuts in wages and benefits.

The opposing standpoints of the workers and the union were evident from the banners carried at the rallies last Thursday. The banners of IG Metall stressed the issue of individual plants. In Offenbach, the union banner read: "We Roländer are Fighting for Our Plant and Our Jobs in Offenbach." Self-made banners held by workers called for solidarity between all Manroland factories as well as fellow

workers at the two other major manufacturers of printing machines—Heidelberg and KBA. One such sign read: "Manroland, KBA, Heidelberg in Workers' Hands—Cooperation, Not Competition," while another read: "Occupy Manroland."

The two positions are irreconcilable. If the fight against the threat of plant closures is left under the control of IG Metall, it is doomed to failure. This would have disastrous consequences not only for individual employees, but for the working class as a whole. The insolvency of Manroland is part of a comprehensive attack on the working and living conditions of the entire European working class.

In the same week that Manroland declared bankruptcy, Germany's biggest energy company, Eon, announced the slashing of 11,000 of its 80,000 jobs worldwide. Of these cuts, 6,500 are to take place in Germany.

Almost simultaneously, Nokia Siemens Networks, one of the largest telephone network suppliers in the world, announced it was reducing its workforce by 25 percent, eliminating 17,000 jobs worldwide, including 3,000 in Germany. Shortly thereafter, the Beiersdorf cosmetics group in Hamburg announced the sacking of 1,000 of its 18,000 employees worldwide, including several hundred redundancies at the company headquarters in Hamburg.

This wave of mass layoffs is just the beginning. In many large corporations and government agencies, public services and banks, such as the Post Bank, plans have already been drawn up for large-scale job cuts. But, as was the case with Manroland, the unions have agreed to a pledge of silence.

The job cuts are a direct result of the international economic crisis and refute all of the propaganda about the alleged strength and robust nature of the German economy.

The Manroland management has conceded this point. In a press release, the company cited the general economic

situation as the cause of its insolvency. The release states: “Since mid-July, a further dramatic drop in orders was evident and this trend has intensified recently. In the wake of the financial crisis it has been increasingly difficult for customers to obtain loans to finance their investments.” According to the company, the market for its products has halved since the beginning of the crisis in 2008.

Manroland and the union present the crisis as an unavoidable natural disaster in order to justify the destruction of thousands of jobs. Workers need to understand the class nature of the crisis.

For many years, a tiny financial oligarchy has amassed untold wealth while wages and social standards have been systematically reduced and the exploitation of workers stepped up. Hedge funds and investment banks have broken up factories and subordinated industrial production to short-term profits. A large part of the industrial base in the United States and Great Britain has already been devastated in this process.

The debt crisis prevailing on the European continent has shifted the centre of gravity for such criminal operations. The financial markets and the ruling elites are intent on reversing all of the social concessions they made to the working class after the Second World War, during the period of the cold war confrontation with the Soviet Union. The European welfare state has long been a thorn in the side of these forces. All that’s left of it—wages, legal protection against dismissal, sick pay, sick leave, statutory maternity leave, public pensions, health and accident insurance—is now to be abolished.

Anyone with even a faint acquaintance with the history of the last century knows where such a social counter-revolution leads. Such a policy is incompatible with democracy and peace. In the course of the last comparable crisis in Europe 80 years ago, the ruling circles in Germany hoisted Hitler into the Chancellery in order to crush the labour movement and prepare a war of conquest.

Similar developments are now emerging in Greece and other European countries. In Greece and Italy, technocratic governments lacking any democratic legitimacy and directly responsible to the international banks are carrying out mass layoffs and wage cuts on a scale not seen in Europe since the Second World War.

These attacks do not stop at the German border. The impending closure of Manroland is part of a sweeping attack

on the entire European and international working class. It is only the working class that can prevent another relapse into barbarism. The fight against the planned plant closures and the defence of jobs must therefore be made the starting point for the political mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme.

For their part, the unions offer only new concessions. They are eager to sacrifice jobs, wages and benefits in order to woo new investors on the basis of “competitiveness.” Whoever makes competitiveness in the context of the capitalist profit system his first principle, however, must inevitably endorse the most oppressive forms of exploitation—up to and including child labour.

The right to work at a fair wage is a fundamental right. It is impossible to satisfy basic needs without a permanent, well-paid job. The loss of a job usually has disastrous consequences. Many of those made unemployed will soon be forced into low-wage jobs, resulting in the impoverishment of all those around them.

When the company’s management and its co-manager, IG Metall, declare that the preservation of jobs and wages is not possible under the given conditions, they are conceding that the interests and needs of the population are incompatible with the capitalist profit system.

The only way to defend jobs is on the basis of a socialist perspective. To this end, factory and action committees that are completely independent of the unions should be established. These committees must make contact with workers at other companies threatened with closure and undertake measures to ensure the democratic control of production.

In order to combat the splitting tactics of the union, which plays off one factory against another, coordinated strikes must be organised across Europe and beyond. In the course of this struggle for an international socialist perspective, it is necessary to construct a movement to replace capitalist governments by workers’ governments, which will expropriate the banks and big corporations and place them under the democratic control of the working population.



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